

Victims' families remember

By: Darlene Denstorff

Published: April 24, 2008, the *Advocate*

GONZALES — Carmen Duplessis fought back tears as she knelt next to Valerie Smith.

The two held hands and hugged, both smiling. Eventually, the tears began to flow.

While not close friends, the Ascension Parish natives have one thing in common — they both lost a loved one to crime.

The women were among more than 50 crime victims and their families gathered at the Gonzales Safety Center to observe National Crime Victims Week on April 15.

Some family members wore T-shirts embossed with photos of their slain relatives while others clutched photographs.

One mother talked about the death of her daughter who was kidnapped from a pay phone 18 years ago. A father questioned why no one has come forward to help solve his son's murder.

The event, hosted by the Donaldsonville District Probation and Parole Office and the 23rd Judicial District Attorney's Office, was held to "give victims and their families a chance to get together and support each other," said Tony Simon with the probation and parole office.

"I wish they had more (events) like this onebecause unless you have been through this you really don't know what we are going through," said Smith, whose mother, sister and 2-year-old nephew were fatally shot in March 1999.



Paula Bell, right, places a hand on friend Amina Landry as she shares the story of the slaying of their children, Katrice Bell and Albert Landry, four years ago. The women were speaking during a dinner for crime victims at the Gonzales Public Safety Center on April 16. Bell called the meeting a blessing, and said, 'With the support of God, we can make it through anything.'

Duplessis was one of a dozen members of her family attending in remembrance of Luke Villar, an 18-year-old St. Amant High School student who was shot to death on Sept. 15, 2001, while cleaning the parking lot of Delaune's Supermarket in St. Amant. Many of the family members, including aunts, uncles, his mother and grandmother, wore buttons with Villar's photograph.

"We never forget Luke," his aunt Sherry Laiche said.

Angie Webre, who was shot and survived the 2001 burglary and witnessed Villar's shooting, said she draws strength from Villar's close-knit family.

"I saw a young boy murdered in front of me," she said. "You never forget that. It is with me every day."

While Villar's family has attended previous events honoring victims, it was the first time for Webre. She wept as she recounted her experience.

"This young man had a future, he was going places and they killed him for no reason," Webre said.

During the event, crime victims and relatives of victims passed a microphone around the room, each talking about the experiences since the crime. Two themes were repeated — the power of faith and need to stop senseless crimes.

"We pray for all of you," Smith said. "We all need to pray. That's what gets us through."

Jenny Gautreau, a victim's rights coordinator of the 23rd Judicial District Attorney's Office, said the event allows families to talk to others with similar experiences.

Webre said the event opened her eyes "about how many people are going through the same thing."

"It's unbelievable to hear the other people's stories," Webre said.

After the ceremony, those attending continued sharing their experiences. Smith talked about her mother's "kindness and giving nature."

"Everyone loved my mother. She was a good person and she is greatly missed," Smith said.

Smith said she speaks about her mother because she wants "everyone to remember the victims."

"Sometimes, it feels like the victims are forgotten & they have no rights," Smith said. "All we hear is about the rights of the criminal and not the rights of the victim."

Smith said her family will have to live "all that all over again" when Shon Miller goes on trial for a second time in the on first-degree murder charges in the deaths of Vessel, Carla Vessel Miller, Shon Miller Jr. and Vaniaro "Bubba" Jackson.

Ascension Parish prosecutors claim Shon Miller fatally shot Vessel in front of her home and then traveled to New St. John Fellowship Church where he shot his wife, son and a deacon at the church.

A jury found Shon Miller guilty of four counts of first-degree murder in 2000, but the Louisiana Supreme Court overturned the conviction and a new trial is set for later this year. The family plans to attend a pre-trial hearing in the case later this month.

“It’s hard, but we do it for justice for our loved ones,” Smith said. “This gives me strength.”